

CHAPTER FIVE

GOD AS COMMUNITY IN UNITY

INTRODUCTION

Much of the present discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity in the Western context debates the ‘God as essence’ in opposition to the ‘God as an Absolute Subject.’ Generally, contemporary Trinitarian scholars seem to view God as essence as obsolete. The focus is trained on how Barth and Rahner responded to God as essence and what to make of their proposal; namely, God as an absolute subject.¹ This general shift in focus has led to the acceptance of the view that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa.²

Although a large number of contemporary Western Christian thinkers operate with the God as an absolute subject model, there is evidently a growing interest in a third model: “God as community in unity” or simply “God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternal correlation, interpenetration, love and communion which make them one sole God.”³ The Western scholars who seek to understand the doctrine of the Trinity within this model generally take their point of departure from the concept of *homoousios* as it is understood by John Calvin, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Athanasius.⁴

¹ P. Collins, “A Critical Review of Recent Writings in the Field of Trinitarian Theology” in *Epworth Review*, vol. 24, 1997, 95–99; W. McWilliams, “Trinitarian Doxology: Jurgen Moltmann on the Relation of Economic and Immanent Trinity” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 1996.

² See J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and Kingdom*, xi; R.E. Olson, “Trinity and Eschatology: The Historical Being of God in Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 219–220; P.K. Jewett, *God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 305; Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 115; and G.D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1968), 250–252.

³ D. Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (London: General Duckworth, 1985); T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Perspective*; L. Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Wellwood: Burns & Oates, 1988).

⁴ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Perspective*, 21–76.

MOTIVES FOR RENEWED INTEREST
IN 'GOD AS COMMUNITY IN UNITY'

Some of the leading Western Christian thinkers who seek to understand the doctrine of the Trinity from the viewpoint of God as community in unity are J. Zizioulas and J.J. O'Donnell.⁵ The Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas makes a candid enquiry into the *plurality model* of the Cappadocian tradition. He particularly enquires into the understanding of personhood in that tradition. Like O'Donnell, Zinzioulas appeals to Richard of St. Victor who understands personhood in the same way as the Cappadocian fathers. Richard of St. Victor understands personhood from the concept of *existence*, which Collins explains as "being in relation." This understanding opposes the *unity model* of the Augustinian tradition that espouses a "unitary psychological modeling of the Godhead and of personhood."⁶

Collins has noted that there are different reasons why a growing number of modern Western Christian thinkers are opting for the God as community in unity model of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity.

One reason is that the social model of the Godhead of the Eastern tradition is seen as that which most closely reflects the primary data of the human experience of divine activity. Another is that the Trinity seen as being-in-relation offers a paradigm for the human community over against such notions as hierarchy and patriarchy. This in turn provides models and metaphors for those seeking political, liberation and feminist theologies.⁷

⁵ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); his article, "On Being a Person—Towards an Ontology of Personhood" in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 1991; and his other article, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution." See also J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 101.

⁶ Collins, "A Critical Review of Recent Writings in the Field of Trinitarian Theology," 97. Other interesting contributors to the Divinity as community in unity model of interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity include Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit, vol. III: The River of Life Flows in the East and in the West*. D. Smith, trans. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983); McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood, A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*, 1990; C.E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Boff, *Trinity and Society*. Other significant contributors in this field are Brown, *The Divine Trinity*; and T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) and *The Trinitarian Perspectives*.

⁷ Collins, "A Critical Review of Recent Writings in the Field of Trinitarian Theology," 95.